

We have to call it School

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This is the story of a very unusual school which existed and thrived for several years in the early seventies. John Holt – America's best known pedagogue wrote a graphic account of this school in one his books. This inspired Alan Falbel from the MIT to go and work in the school for a year and write a PhD thesis on this amazing school. Peggy Hughes – a film maker worked in the school for two years and made a film titled WE HAVE TO CALL IT SCHOOL.

Early in the film one of the teacher says, “Children have to go school, and if we didn’t call it a school, they would not come here.” But, except for the fact that children have to be here during school hours, it is unlike any school. No “education” takes place here. It is a place where some eighty-five children and a few adults indulge in their passions. The adults are not teachers in the usual sense. None of them have a B.Ed or a degree in teaching. But having worked for years in the big wide world they possess many demonstrable skills, which the children love.

The Little New School was founded in the early 1970’s in a suburb of Copenhagen, Denmark. The Danish government has a reputation of funding 85% costs of the schools run by parents. The parents have to collect just 15% of the costs. This enables many experimental schools to blossom. The adults who started this unique venture had earlier taught in several off beat schools. Some of these schools became too particular about children’s “outcomes” and started veering towards normal schools. This disillusioned these adults and they decided to start a new place for children.

The school is located in an industrial part and basically has one long hall and two small rooms. There are no text books or school curriculum. There are no bells, periods, homework or class work. Of course there are no exams, tests, evaluations and marks. There are some interesting books, a workshop and a gymnasium where children and lots of things to make and do.

The school does not have any fancy scientific equipment, nor does it propose to buy one. What do the children do the whole day? Well the day starts with music. Some of the teachers are professional musicians and they share their love for music with the children. In the morning for almost an hour the children sway to music. Their actions are very spontaneous and rhythmic.

There is a small but good collection of books. The workshop has a modest set of woodworking tools, and equipment for heating and working metal. There is an oxy-acetylene cylinder and a torch to cut and weld metal. There are several science and math puzzles but no Math lab, nor any professional science activities programme like the Nuffield etc – science equipment which most American and British schools have come to think of as essential. There was no separate painting room but there was evidence all over that the children did paint. There were two hand looms and one sewing machine. There

was a fish tank and it was totally legitimate for a child to spend hours watching goldfish. In the music room was a piano, some guitars, a bass fiddle made by a teacher and some drums.

The school was not richly endowed. It had only a small part of the material and equipment you will find in any conventional school. But whatever existed was there for the children to use. There were no elaborate rituals of getting the library book, or test tubes issued.

One reason for the sparseness of equipment is that the school can't afford it. The children are resourceful enough to borrow things they need from other institutions.